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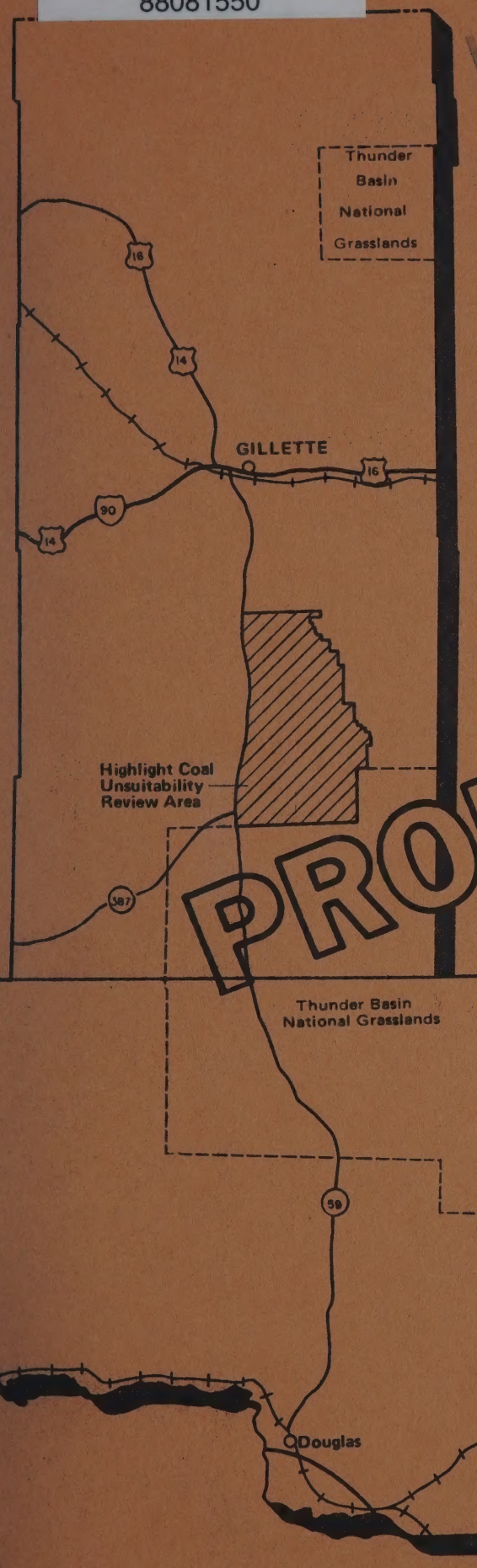
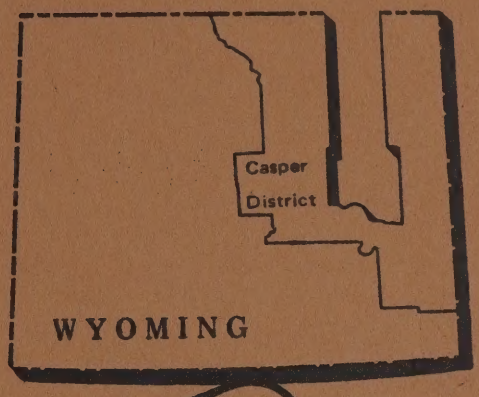
Determinations of Unsuitability for Coal Development

Eastern Powder River Basin Area - Casper District





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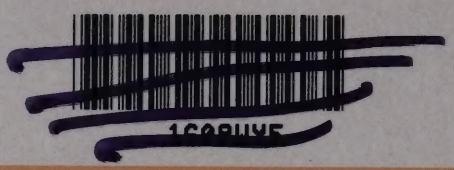

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PROPOSED REVISION TO THE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK PLAN FOR THE EASTERN POWDER RIVER BASIN

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

This planning supplement proposes modification of a 1977 planning decision concerning potential development of federal coal reserves in the Eastern Powder River Basin of Wyoming. The complete text of the proposed decision can be found on page 6-7.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) found it necessary to reconsider its 1977 decision as a result of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA), which was signed into law after the Eastern Powder River Basin Management Framework Plan (MFP) was completed. Shortly after the passage of SMCRA, the Department of the Interior undertook preparation of a new environmental statement (ES) for the Federal coal management program, a draft of which was issued on December 15, 1978. This planning supplement is consistent with the preferred alternative in the draft ES.

Section 522(b) of SMCRA directs the Secretary of the Interior to conduct review of federal coal lands to determine if any areas should be designated unsuitable for surface or underground mining. In response, the Secretary established a task force to develop unsuitability criteria to apply to lands with known recoverable coal. Twenty-four criteria were approved by the Secretary for interim planning. They address such things as wilderness, scenic areas, natural and historic values, wildlife, water resources, flood plains, alluvial valleys, and farmlands. A list of the criteria is included in Appendix A. For a complete description of the interim coal unsuitability criteria see the draft environmental statement for the Federal coal management program, December 15, 1978; Table 3-1, page 3-8.

This supplement reflects application of the interim coal unsuitability criteria and exceptions and other multiple use considerations. Specific tracts have not been identified for coal development. Identification and delineation of tracts would occur only if a Secretarial decision is made to proceed with new coal leasing.

Overview

The Casper District completed the current MFP for the Eastern Powder River Planning Unit in June 1977. The planning unit encompasses all of Campbell County and that part of Converse County north of the North Platte River. The current MFP contains multiple use decisions that guide management and development of federal lands and mineral estate within the planning unit. Specifically, it addresses the potential for further coal development. The multiple use decision for coal development identifies 19,200 acres in southeast Campbell and northeast Converse counties that could be considered for leasing through 1983. A number of site specific tracts were also identified. However, a September 1977 court decision, Natural Resources Defense Council vs. Hughes, enjoined the Secretary from identifying specific coal leasing tracts. Thus, the site specific areas identified in the 1977 MFP are not being considered in this revision.

While most of the coal in the planning unit was considered developable in 1977, the decision to confine development through 1983 was based on socioeconomic considerations. That view was supported by public comment, planning area analysis, other sections of the MFP, and other studies and reports. In addition, major conflicts with other resource values--such as oil and gas fields--were resolved in the areas being considered in 1977 for possible new coal development.

Area Unsuitability Review

The area being reviewed is outlined on the maps in Appendix B. It is somewhat different from the area considered in the 1977 MFP decision due to:

1. Including moderate potential coal in addition to high potential coal (see note below) in the area being reviewed. This is consistent with the "preferred alternative" in the Department's draft ES described above.

2. Deleting that part of the 19,200 acre area within the Thunder Basin National Grasslands. The grasslands were deleted because the U.S. Forest Service does not have a current land use plan for the area.

3. Including additional lands for consideration outside of the grasslands to assure a reasonable test area for application of the unsuitability criteria.

The criteria are not being applied to the remainder of the planning unit at this time due to budgetary and manpower limitations. This will be completed during the next planning update for the area, which is tentatively scheduled for 1982.

Note: High Potential Coal, as defined by the U.S. Geological Survey is coal with a stripping ratio of 0 to 4.5 cubic yards of overburden to 1 ton of coal.

Moderate Potential Coal is defined as coal with a stripping ratio of 4.5 to 6.5 cubic yards of overburden to 1 ton of coal.

The review area contains approximately 134,000 acres. Within this total acreage, 82,000 acres are underlain by high and moderate potential coal. There are approximately 18,000 acres of the high and moderate potential coal that are privately or state owned, or currently under federal lease.

Definition of Area Classifications

The proposed multiple use decision on coal is based on the following classifications:

1. Unsuitable areas for coal development based on unsuitability criteria. Unsuitable areas are those affected by one or more of the unsuitability criteria and are not amenable to criteria exceptions. An example would be an area that contains active bald and golden eagle nests (criterion 11) and where disturbance during the breeding season cannot be controlled or nests cannot be moved (exceptions to criterion 11).

2. Unacceptable areas based on multiple use considerations. Unacceptable areas are exempted from coal development due to consideration of other multiple-use values.

3. Acceptable areas for coal development. Acceptable areas are categorized as follows:

a. Acceptable--defined as areas acceptable for further consideration for coal development, which were not excluded by application of unsuitability criteria or multiple use considerations.

b. Acceptable pending further study--defined as areas where known conflicts exist but the effect of the unsuitability criteria cannot be determined without further site-specific analysis.

c. Acceptable pending further inventory--defined as an area where inventory data relative to the unsuitability criteria are lacking.

Surface Owner Consultation

As part of our public participation process, a letter was sent to landowners within the review area. The letter provided the surface owners an opportunity to express their views concerning potential development of the federal coal resource under their private surface.

Public Coordination

A public meeting will be held in Gillette, March 28, to explain in more detail the steps followed in reaching the proposed modification of our 1977 multiple use decision on coal. Anyone desiring more information prior to the public meeting can review the complete MFP, as well as the unsuitability criteria and related findings at BLM's Casper District Office, 951 Union Boulevard in Casper.

After filing the final ES for the Federal coal management program and after the Secretary's final decision on the unsuitability criteria, BLM will finalize this planning proposal. That will likely occur in June or July 1979. There will also be an opportunity for a public hearing, prior to finalizing the proposal, to take testimony from anyone who believes they will be adversely affected by the proposed coal development decision, if it is adopted.

UPDATED EASTERN POWDER RIVER PLAN

The proposed revision to the existing multiple use decision for coal development is listed below with rationale. When the final decision is made, identified acceptable areas may be considered for future coal development.

Proposed Multiple Use Decision

1. Unacceptable areas based upon multiple use considerations. Coal development within the Highlight oil and gas field, as shown on Map 3, will be postponed until economic recovery of the oil and gas is complete. This includes about 31,000 acres with some 4.6 billion tons of estimated coal reserves.

2. Acceptable areas for coal development. Acceptable areas, determined from application of the interim unsuitability criteria as well as multiple use considerations, will be given for further consideration for coal development. These are displayed on Map 3 and include about 15,000 acres with some 2.2 billion tons of estimated coal reserves.

3. Acceptable pending further study. From application of the interim unsuitability criteria as well as multiple use considerations, areas were determined to be "acceptable pending further study." These are also displayed on Map 3. Specifically, areas A, B, C, and D need further study of possible alluvial valley floors. Areas A and B also need further study to delineate sage grouse strutting and nesting grounds and to determine the possible existence of the endangered black-footed ferret in a known prairie dog town. This category includes about 18,000 acres with some 2.7 billion tons of estimated coal reserves.

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UPDATED EASTERN POWDER RIVER PLAN

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The above acceptable area categories total about 33,000 acres with some 4.9 billion tons of estimated coal reserves. They would be subject to the following if the Secretary decides new coal leasing is necessary:

a. delineation of alluvial valley floors (areas A, B, C, and D);

b. wildlife studies (areas A and B);

c. tract delineation, ranking, and selection;

d. findings of an environmental assessment.

Rationale

There is no need to create conflict over development of different energy minerals because of the vast quantities of coal available for development within the review area. This view is consistent with the 1977 MFP decision which was supported by comments from the oil and gas industry and the general public.

No areas were determined to be unsuitable for coal development after applying both the interim unsuitability criteria and the exceptions to the criteria. However, as noted under part 3 of the decision, some areas require further study. An early and unusually severe winter interfered with final application of the unsuitability critera dealing with alluvial valley floors, high interest state resident fish and wildlife, and federally listed threatened and endangered species. The necessary work will be accomplished during the upcoming field season, following which BLM will complete the unsuitability criteria application to areas A, B, C, and D of the proposed decision.

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APPENDIX A

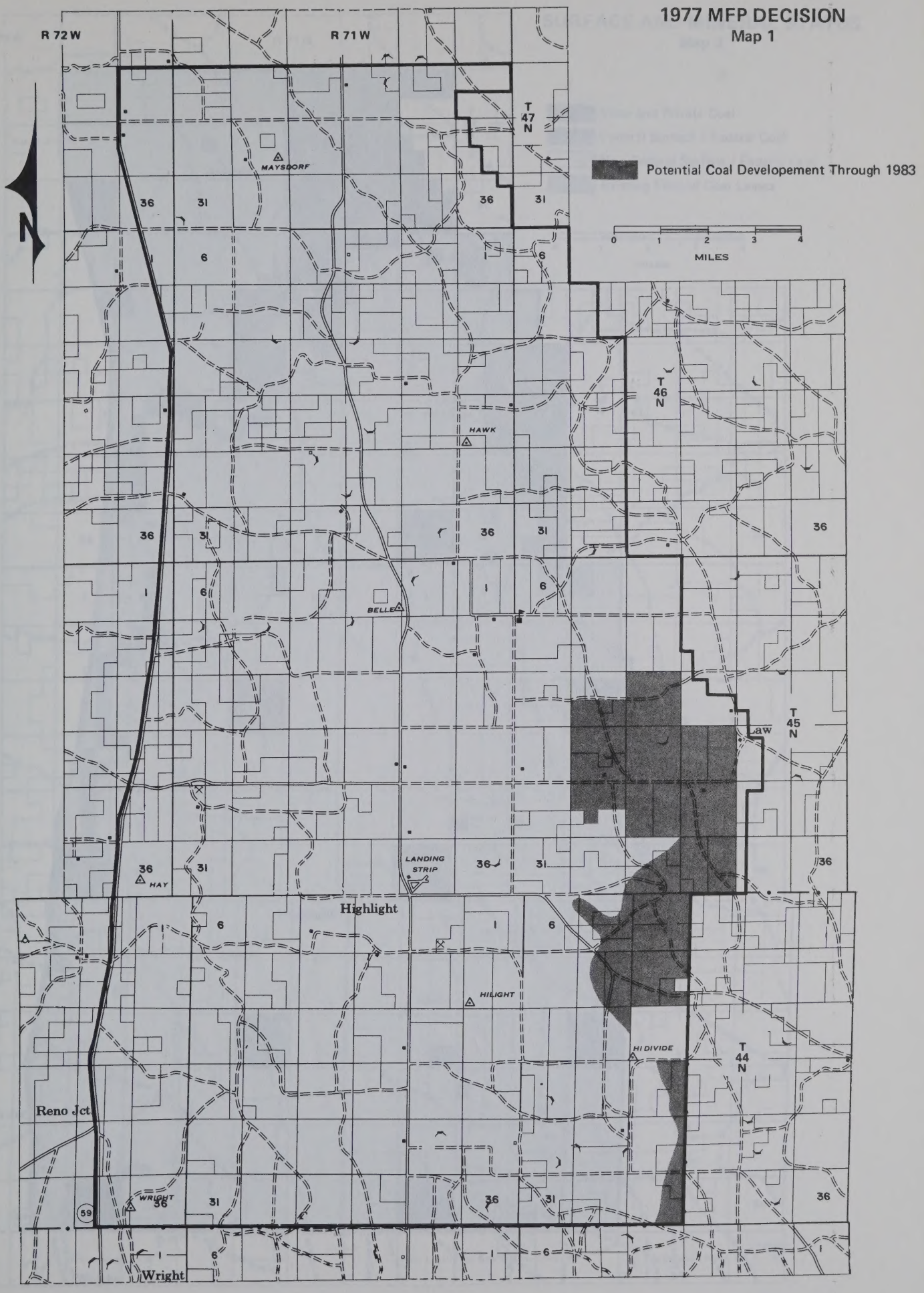
Unsuitability Criteria

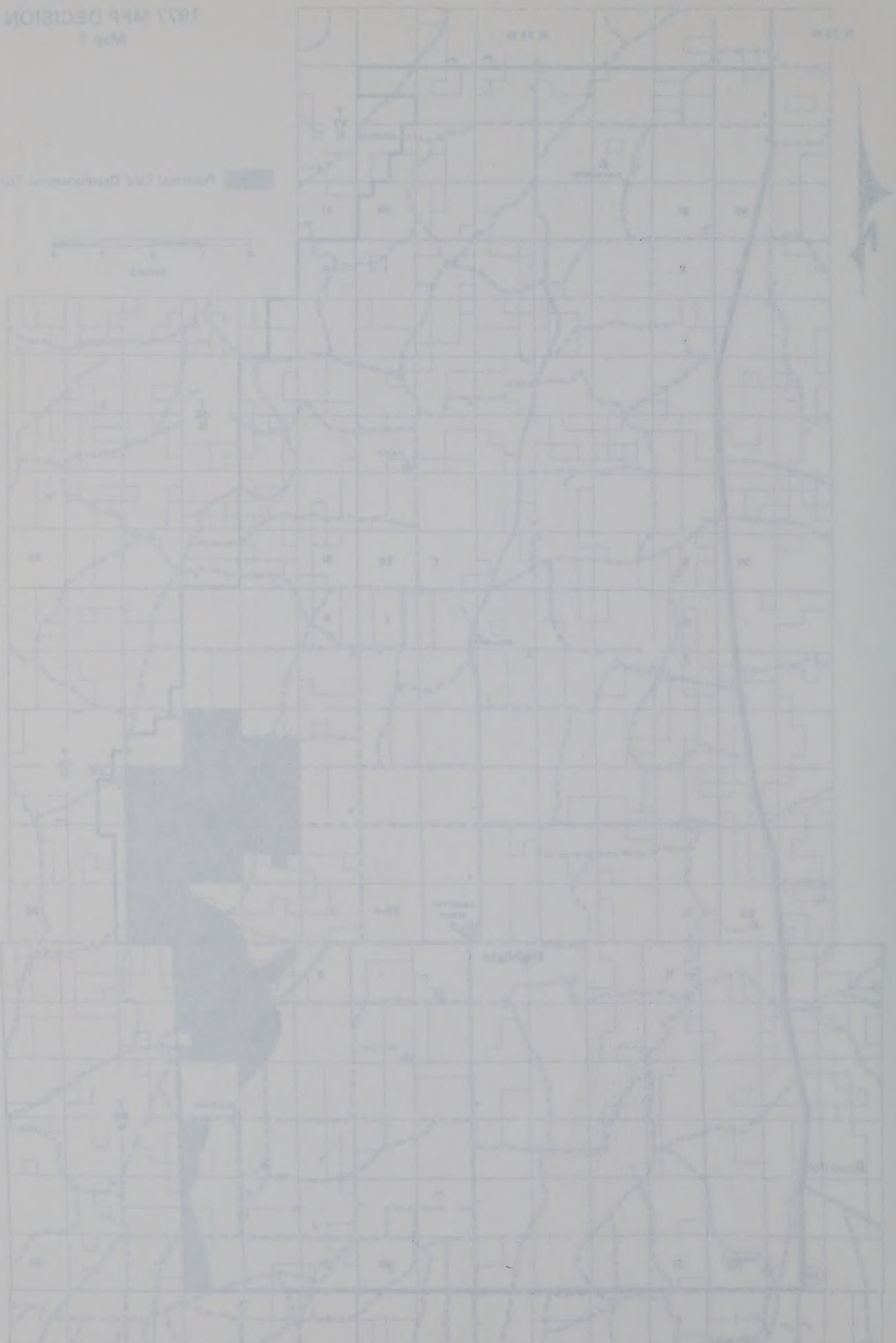
1. Federal land systems, i.e., National Park System, National Wildlife Refuge System, National System of Trails, and the like.
2. Rights-of-way and easements.
3. Buffer zones along rights-of-way and adjacent to communities and buildings.
4. Wilderness study areas.
5. Scenic areas.
6. Lands used for scientific studies.
7. Historic lands and sites.
8. Natural areas.
9. Federally listed threatened and endangered species.
10. State listed threatened and endangered species.
11. Bald and golden eagle nests.
12. Bald and golden eagle roost and concentration areas.
13. Falcon cliff nesting sites.
14. High interest migratory birds.
15. High interest State resident fish and wildlife.
16. Wetlands.
17. Floodplains.
18. Municipal watersheds.
19. National resource waters.
20. State lands unsuitable (not available at this time).
21. State proposed criteria (not available at this time).
22. Prime farmlands.
23. Alluvial valley floors.
24. Reclaimability.

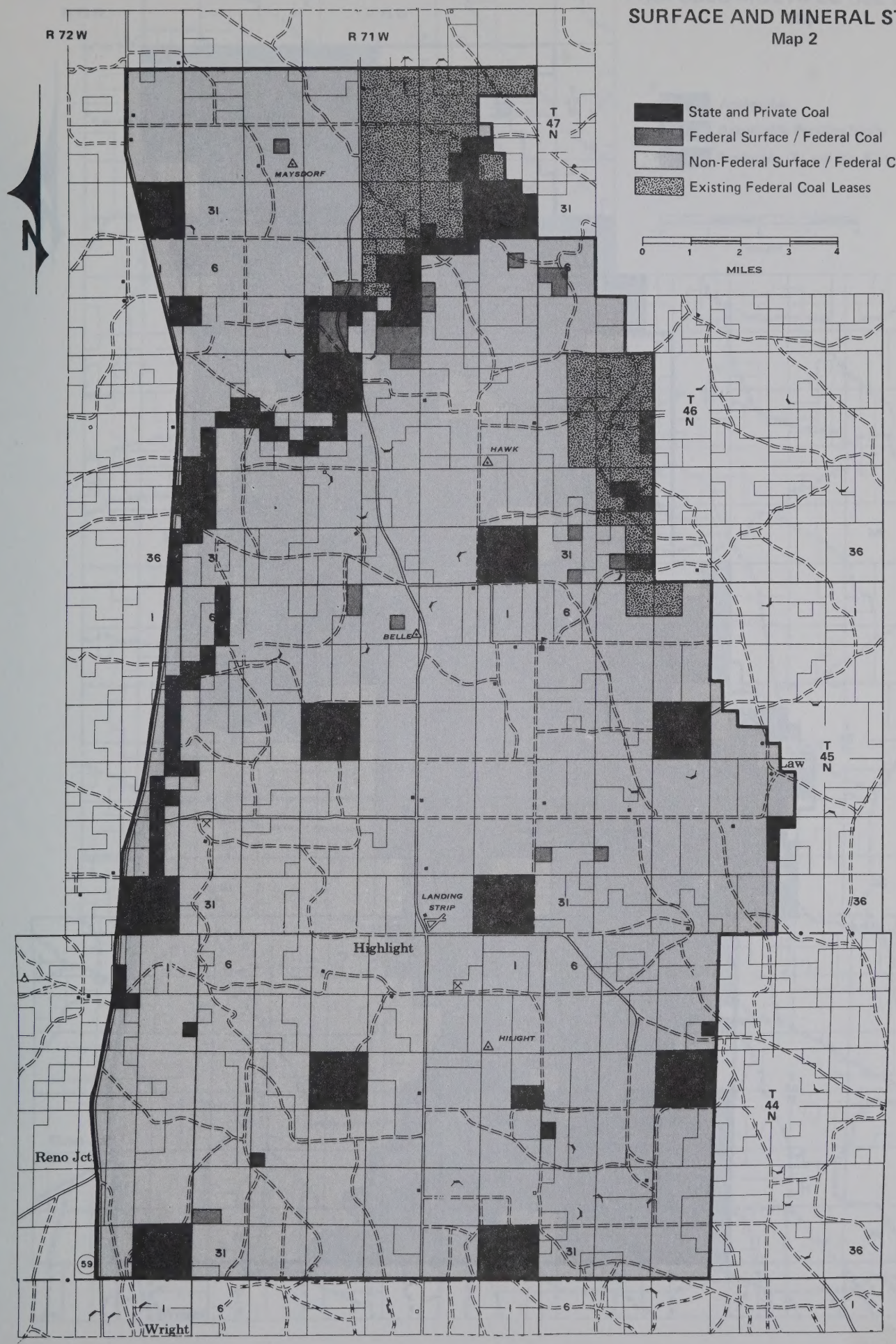
APPENDIX B

Maps

1977 MFP DECISION
Map 1






SURFACE AND MINERAL STATUS
Map 2
State and Private Coal
Federal Surface / Federal Coal
Non-Federal Surface / Federal Coal
Existing Federal Coal Leases
0 1 2 3 4
MILES
R 72 W
R 71 W
T 47 N
T 46 N
T 45 N
T 44 N
MAYSDORF
HAWK
BELLE
LANDING STRIP
Highlight
HILIGHT
Reno Jct.
Wright
Law
59
31
6
1
36

PROPOSED MULTIPLE USE DECISION

Map 3